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Being and Becoming Visible: Women, Performance, and Visual Culture

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Introduction

OLGA M. MESROPOVA AND STACEY WEBER-FÈVE

The Visible Woman was conceived as a celebration of feminist scholarship on performance and visual culture previously published in the *National Women's Studies Association Journal* (NWSA Journal). As editors of this collection we have aimed to bring together essays that cross geographical and disciplinary borders while examining female representation in a variety of performative and visual media. In this vein, the present volume includes case studies related to such diverse genres and media as theater, cinema, painting, television, performance activism, and photography from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We have also sought to offer a wide range of feminist theoretical approaches to the study of performance and visual culture and thereby examine women both as the producers of images as well as a commodified or politicized spectacle of the media's gaze. Most significantly, the present collection of essays situates the disciplines of visual culture and performance studies within two conceptual frameworks—multicultural and feminist—through the overarching thematic trope of visibility.

"Becoming visible," understood in the broader sense as a means to legitimize underrepresented groups (gendered, sexual, racial, and so forth), is perhaps one of the most essential concepts of feminist theory and practice. Scholars regard visibility as a central component of identity that allows certain individuals, groups, and communities to celebrate the very same "visible signifiers of difference" that have traditionally targeted them for discrimination (Walker 1993, 868). The essays in the present anthology employ the notion of female visibility in both a literal and figurative sense, while examining the sociopolitical and cultural influences surrounding the production of female identity. Viewed collectively, our contributors discuss a complex web of female visibilities that range from women's use of activist art to empower themselves and their communities to representations of female subjects as they are constructed (that is, made visible) in a variety of visual and performative works.

While highlighting multiple systems of visual representation in distinct cultural settings, this book echoes ongoing theoretical debates on global intervisuality. Introduced by Nicholas Mirzoeff, the theory of intervisuality (or visual intertextuality) refers to the visual cross-referencing between various media while attempting to explain how viewers interpret images in light of other visual texts (Mirzoeff 2000). The essays in this collection all point to the underlying intervisual themes, tropes, and patterns that form various modes of female visibility

in performance and visual culture. While focusing on the role of visual and performative media within specific cultural contexts of production and reception, *The Visible Woman* exemplifies the relationality of female representations as they transgress geographical, cultural, and sociopolitical boundaries. By presenting the visible woman from the critical perspectives of diverse academic disciplines, we also strive to multiply lines of inquiry from which scholars may study gender, performance, and visual culture. It is our hope that, by directly and indirectly presenting several levels of critical interpretation, this project will provide feminist scholars and teachers with inspiration for their own research and teaching of female (self-)representation in performance and visual culture.

The space for critical reflection created by this volume is, in some ways, reminiscent of a museum exhibition in terms of scope and objective. Museums of all types purport to define relationships among communities, nations, and peoples through objective and subjective (as well as personal and collective) interpretations of artifacts, experiences, and environments. To situate the anthology's essays within the unified framework of a museum exhibition (whose goal is to assemble, preserve, showcase, and inspire), we begin with Margaret D. Stetz's essay, "Feminist Exhibitionism: When the Women's Studies Professor Is a Curator." The comparison of this anthology to a museum display logically gives rise to the issues of curatorship. Stetz addresses the role of the curator and explores the potential of museums and other institutional exhibitions as sites for conducting critical feminist work. Stetz bases this important claim on her extensive experience teaching Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* in her introductory courses in women's studies. Stetz explains that she supplements her instruction of Walker's essay with a 1992 British-made documentary film about Walker in which the novelist expresses her dislike of museums, describing them as an elitist example of Western society's treatment of art. For Stetz, Walker's attitude poses a dilemma because she wants her students to take Walker's words seriously but not automatically dismiss museums and curatorship as elitist. In the remainder of her essay Stetz takes the reader through an autobiographical journey of professional experiences that illustrate the ways in which exhibition work may advance and even embody feminist pedagogical principles. Through a discussion of interdisciplinarity, political activism, and community outreach, Stetz calls on women's studies faculty to assume the role of guest curator—a position that crosses boundaries and allows one to teach about race, class, sexual orientation, and gender to a wider audience.

Stetz's discussion of the guest curator also extends to the other essays included in this anthology. Each part of this collection approaches the is-

sue of the visible woman from a different perspective. In part I, entitled "Spectators, Spectacles, and Cultural Icons," we group four essays that treat photography, painting, television, and film. This part situates the visible woman within two specific unifying tropes of image and persona, while also considering the spectator's engagement with the visual text. The essayists in this part examine image and persona across constructions and interpretations of five Anglo-American cultural icons: Princess Diana, the Madonna, Mary Poppins, Maria from *The Sound of Music* (1965), and Lucille Ball.

As its title suggests, Jill R. Chancey's essay, "Diana Doubled: The Fairytale Princess and the Photographer," investigates representations of Princess Diana in photography, specifically in the tabloid press. Chancey's work explores the image (or simulacrum) of Princess Diana that both British and American media have created since her death. By focusing on the photographs that surfaced in the media after Diana's passing, Chancey discusses how the princess's image suddenly changed in a very specific way. Diana was no longer portrayed in a negative manner, as she had been shortly before her death. Instead, the media focus turned to images of Princess Diana as mother, humanitarian, and fairytale princess. In this essay Chancey employs several critical theories of Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, and Linda Dégh to examine the context of the tabloid, the myth of the fairytale heroine, and the use of photography in the construction of Diana's images. As Chancey analyzes these frozen images, she asserts that the posthumous version of Princess Diana—especially in her role as mother—is invariably coded in a positive light ("beautiful") as opposed to the frequently negative ("inappropriate" or "unfeminine") portrayals of the princess during her lifetime.

The construction of motherhood takes a very different form in the second essay in part I, Denise Bauer's "Alice Neel's Portraits of Mother Work." Moving from the quasi-ethereal "feminine" constructions of Princess Diana, we come upon a hyperrealistic image of motherhood and femininity represented in Alice Neel's paintings. Bauer maintains that Neel consistently made the experiences of mothers the subject of her work by transgressing, parodying, and critiquing the Madonna and child painting genre, while simultaneously reflecting on the social construct of "mother" as it shifted throughout the twentieth century. Drawing attention to class and race analyses of motherhood and family in Neel's art, Bauer discusses many of Neel's portraits of mother work that chronicle the shifts in definitions and understandings of maternal subjectivity. Bauer concludes that not only did Neel privilege the tasks of motherhood but also her images brought and still bring to light the inner struggles women face in caring for their children within a largely unsupportive cultural and political context.

A different approach to parenthood emerges in Anne McLeer's "Practical Perfection? The Nanny Negotiates Gender, Class, and Family Contradictions in 1960s Popular Culture." McLeer's essay examines two popular mid-1960s films, *Mary Poppins* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1964) and *The Sound of Music* (dir. Robert Wise, 1965). The author contends that, despite their foreign settings, British stars, and historical time frames, these two films reveal social and political concerns regarding the constitution of the family that were common in 1960s America. McLeer ascertains that both films address anxieties surrounding masculinity, motherhood, and domestic gender roles. By investigating the construction of the nanny's persona in these two films, McLeer sees a link between this liminal figure and the reinstallation of the father's role as head of the household, a familial structure that was believed to be in jeopardy in mid-sixties America.

The construction of persona and domestic gender roles also figures largely in the fourth essay of part I, Lori Landay's "Millions 'Love Lucy': Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon." Landay opens her essay with a discussion of how mass consumer culture is central to understanding and interpreting all levels of the Lucy phenomenon. Landay traces this notion across individual episodes that revolve around the advertisement and consumption of commodities. More specifically, her essay deals with the "good life" portrayed in the series, Ball's public persona as "just a housewife," and the myriad of consumer goods tied to the show in the fifties (that are also popular today). Landay provides a close reading of the episode "Lucy Does a TV Commercial" in relation to this construction of the Lucy phenomenon as well as to gender and middle-class life in the postwar era. She concludes that Lucy was framed by and broke the framework of commodification. Landay asserts that, while the Lucy show participated in the mass consumer economy of its time, its comedy played on conflicts and anxieties about consumption and domesticity.

Moving from the issues of female image and persona presented in the first part of this anthology, the volume's second part, "Explicit Selves, Explicit Bodies," brings together four essays that explore the image of the female body both as a locus of powerful personal stories and as a presentation of sociocultural and political perspectives. The term "explicit body" originated with Rebecca Schneider's *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), a study of feminist performance artists who use their own bodies as a site for cultural criticism. In her book Schneider compares female bodies to symbolic stages across which the performers reenact social dramas and traumas (Schneider 1997, 6-7). In this anthology we apply the notion of explicit bodies to a diverse range of subjects as well as performative and visual media, including feminist cancer theater, a cinematic biography of Tina Turner, photography in Weimar Germany, and a photographic exhibit developed by low-income, single-parent students

in the United States. Through an explication of bodies in visual art, performance, and activism, this part's contributors discuss the power of female explicit bodies (and explicit selves) to facilitate a critical dialogue with mainstream representations of women.

One example of a direct exploration of "explicit body" performance theory is Mary K. DeShazer's essay "Fractured Borders: Women's Cancer and Feminist Theater." This essay examines theatrical representations of breast, ovarian, and uterine cancer in four feminist plays from the 1990s: Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Wit*, Maxine Bailey and Sharon M. Lewis's *Sistahs*, Susan Miller's *My Left Breast*, and Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room*. Combining close interpretative readings of these plays with postmodern theories of the body, writings of French feminists, and performance theory, DeShazer frames her discussion within two principal trajectories. First, she foregrounds personal narratives that highlight female cancer victims' sense of agency, despite their grim individual experiences with the disease. Second, DeShazer reveals how the feminist playwrights question, and at times condemn, both the impersonality and inefficiencies of the U.S. health care system. While juxtaposing cancer's private and public domains, as well as disturbing and graphic depictions of individual suffering performed on stage, DeShazer's essay considers how feminist cancer theater can elicit empathy and activism from its audience.

The investigation of the public/private dichotomy also shapes Diane Shoos's essay "Representing Domestic Violence: Ambivalence and Difference in *What's Love Got to Do with It*." Here Shoos examines Brian Gibson's 1993 film based on the autobiography of American pop diva Tina Turner. While reading the film's narrative in the context of recent feminist and clinical debates on domestic violence and female victimization, Shoos analyzes the film's counterpunctual presentations of Tina Turner's private relationship with her abusive husband and public images of the two as a happy professional couple. Interpreting the film through the disturbing lens of an explicitly violated female body, Shoos critiques Gibson's filmic portrayal of domestic violence. Applying Stuart Hall's discussion of "visibility" and "invisibility" in black popular culture, Shoos argues that, despite the film's powerful and clearly "visible" depiction of domestic violence, Gibson's cinematic battered woman ultimately remains tacitly invisible. Moreover, instead of calling attention to domestic violence as a serious social problem (and to battered women as an oppressed group), the film offers comfortable positions that affirm social stereotypes of race, class, and gender.

Societal stereotypes resurface in Vivyan C. Adair's essay "The Missing Story of Ourselves: Poor Women, Power, and the Politics of Feminist Representation." In this essay Adair discusses a nationally touring photographic and narrative exhibit produced and organized by low-income,

single-parent students. The concept of "explicit bodies" discussed earlier in reference to feminist theater is also applicable to the visual and verbal codes of this installation. While the images that Adair discusses do not have the overtly corporeal nature of feminist theater (although poverty has undoubtedly left its mark on the women's faces and bodies), the photographic and textual presentations of impoverished parents serve as sites of broader social significance. In this capacity the exhibit not only conveys individual (hi)stories of women from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds but also provides an insider's perspective on perceptions of poverty and government welfare reforms as well as broader problems of political economy. As Adair argues, through their powerful and disturbing messages, these pictorial self-narratives have given a voice to each individual woman while simultaneously permitting them to express their collective identity. As in feminist theater, these "stories from the margins" give prominence to an underrepresented group while advocating activism and compassion among the exhibit's viewers.

The role of photographic images in the empowerment of the female subject is also central to the final essay in this part, Mila Ganeva's "Fashion Photography and Women's Modernity in Weimar Germany: The Case of Yva." While focusing on the fetishization of the explicit female body in the context of conspicuous consumption, Ganeva's essay deals with the work of Yva, a prolific professional photographer in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s. A creator of a unique visual language that combined the aesthetics of fashion photography, advertising, and conventional portraiture, Yva was also highly innovative in her presentation of female models. Ganeva contends that, at a time when photographic images of women (intended for the voyeuristic gaze of the male consumer) began to proliferate in various forms of commercial culture, Yva attempted to undermine the standard appearance of female models as stereotypical sexual symbols. The author demonstrates how this female photographer created overtly sexual images of women's bodies as consumerist objects ("explicit bodies" in the literal sense) while simultaneously representing her subjects as active agents of modern life.

The third part of the anthology, entitled "Iconographies of Communal Identity," examines visual and performative (self-)representations of women within the wider sociocultural contexts of place-based rituals, traditions, and communities. While analyzing the discourses of culturally liminal, underrepresented, or traumatized groups, this part's contributors all point toward the transformative and empowering potential of visual culture and performance. Through close readings of diverse ethnic and cultural female representations, these three essays address visual and performative modes of expression as sites of female self-realization, agency, and activism.

The convergence of art and activism is central to Kim Miller's essay, "Iconographies of Gender, Poverty, and Power in Contemporary South African Visual Culture." This essay introduces the reader to the Philani Project, a women's textile art cooperative in the impoverished township of Crossroads, South Africa. Originally conceived as an antipoverty initiative aimed at training unemployed mothers for careers as commercial textile designers, the cooperative has afforded women the opportunity to employ visually powerful designs in both creative production and community-based activism. Contrary to traditional scholarly discourses of poverty that either victimize or romanticize the poor, Miller stresses that the women of the Philani Project have aestheticized their disadvantaged socioeconomic situation as images of dignity and empowerment. Using bell hooks's concept of "liberatory imagination," Miller notes that, through the creation of their visual autobiographical narratives, these textile artists have developed a strategy of resistance by combining disturbing narratives with bold colors and brilliant designs. In this capacity, in addition to gaining relative economic independence through the sale of their work, these women artists have also used their art to speak as active agents on behalf of impoverished women in postapartheid South Africa.

Emmanuel David's essay, "Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Gendered Collective Action: The Case of Women of the Storm following Hurricane Katrina," provides further exploration of the role of feminist art in activist movements. Focusing on what he terms the "gendered performance activism" of the New Orleans-based organization, Women of the Storm, David demonstrates the pivotal role that this group's performances have played in the region's recovery after Hurricane Katrina. The group originally conceived their activities as a means of lobbying the U.S. Congress to pass federal legislation regarding the restoration and protection of the Gulf Coast. David argues that—in addition to their original requests for material resources—Women of the Storm have also engaged in a larger symbolic attempt "to repair a sense of home and community." While appropriating sociohistorical practices, traditional symbols, and rituals unique to New Orleans culture (such as traditional jazz funerals and second line parades), the group became a public face for those affected by the Katrina catastrophe. Through a detailed description of one of the group's dramatizations in New Orleans' City Park, the author exemplifies how these women's collective "performative actions" evoked the rhetoric of trauma and remembrance while promoting the preservation of their city's cultural memory.

The theme of place-based communities and their respective rituals and symbols is further investigated in Caroline Brown's essay "The Representation of the Indigenous Other in *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Piano*." This essay focuses on the cinematic representations of two

indigenous communities as they interact with nonnative women. The two films analyzed in this essay were released in 1992 and 1993 respectively; the former is an independent film written and directed by American filmmaker Julie Dash, the latter is the work of New Zealand director Jane Campion. While employing Gayatri Spivak's discussion of the marginalization of the subaltern and Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze, Brown discusses these two films' constructions of native groups (Gullah and Maori) as "cultural others." Brown argues that, although both directors acknowledge and represent the complexity of aboriginal cultures, the films' indigenous characters never play a fully formed role. Instead, the Gullah and Maori communities serve as a silenced backdrop that facilitates the nonnative (that is, European) heroines' self-empowerment and affirmation. Although both directors seemingly marginalize the native communities, Brown poses the question whether a character's centrality to the narrative is essential to the creation of powerful representations of "otherness." Through a close reading of the two films' narratives, the author demonstrates that a discourse that ostensibly bears traits of cinematic Orientalism can ultimately be read as a challenge to established representations of indigenous groups.

Viewed collectively, the three parts of this volume treat the visual and performative (self-)representations of women within a broad range of sociocultural, political, and geographical contexts through a thematic lens of visibility. As editors of this project we have attempted to bring together essays that address the trope of visibility from two overarching perspectives. One group of essays examines the potential of performative and visual art to provide empowering visibility to culturally liminal or invisible groups. Essays dealing with South African textiles, feminist cancer theater, feminist performance activism in New Orleans, and a photographic exhibit by single-parent students are all salient examples of the visibility that these underrepresented groups acquire through their artwork. The other group of essays in this collection addresses the commodification and manipulation of female visibility. Ranging from images of Princess Diana, photographic models in Weimar Germany, a cinematic portrayal of Tina Turner, and the televised persona of Lucille Ball, these case studies examine the construction of female hypervisibility as it is negotiated in high and low cultural contexts. Unified by the organizing theme of a museum exhibit, the essays in this book point to the multi-layered nature of visibility as both a site of inclusion and agency and a form of spectacle and exhibition. This collection does not claim to be exhaustive in its scope of methodologies, geographical contexts, or visual forms. However, it is our hope that the essays in this anthology will inspire further cross-disciplinary, multicultural, and intervisual approaches to the study of gender as well as its diverse modes of being and becoming visible through performance and visual culture.

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